

**Review of Renata Salecl's, *The Tyranny of Choice*  
Society and Space-Environment and Planning D**

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I recently attended a commencement ceremony at a mid-size, liberal arts college on the east coast of the United States. The near perfect weather—sunny and warm, comfortable enough for either coats and ties, or t-shirts and shorts—and the rolling, center-campus green made for an auspicious setting from which graduates and their families could mark a new beginning and embark on a new phase of life. The terms and limits of this new phase—what graduates could expect and were expected to do with their lives—was as at once harrowing and quite commonsensical. The commencement speaker, an alumnus of the school, reminded students about the realities of the world into which they were stepping and what it meant for their economic futures and overall life prospects. A few years ago, he explained, he was out of work, just like many other people because of the recession. Now, however, he was gainfully employed. The key to his successful transformation? “I needed to invent my own personal brand”. He made clear to the graduates that if they wanted to succeed in this highly competitive world, they too needed to think of themselves as their own personal brands. Carefully cultivating the right brand was necessary to effectively “market yourself” and “stand toe to toe with anyone, anywhere”. This personal branding was, of course, “a promise to your employer”, he said, but “it’s not just about your work-life, but your whole life”.

What an uncanny situation we find ourselves in today. Market logics and the ideology of rational choice so overwhelm today’s imaginations and desires that they beg to form the basis of our whole identities—economic and otherwise. Critical scholars and others have long sought to denaturalize market capitalism by exploring the relationship between market-ideology on the one hand, and individual identity and behavior on the other. Such analyses, it is hoped, might provide crucial insights into how people are animated by ideology and structure, and illuminate openings for social change.

In *The Tyranny of Choice*, Renata Salecl expands and deepens this analysis. Working from a psychoanalytic tradition, she demonstrates the important role that unconscious emotions and desires play in shaping subjectivity and agency. More precisely, she brings Lacanian theory to bear on questions of *why* and *how* we embrace economic rationalism as well as how these processes inhibit social change. Salecl demonstrates that an ideology of individual, unlimited choice manifests as personal dissatisfaction, increased anxiety, and never-ending efforts to improve our individual selves at the expense of the social. In the process, she manages to make Lacanian theory, as well as her own insights, legible for a broad audience. Her intervention is timely, as cracks opening for social transformation are widening, even while “rational choice, transferred from the domain of economics, has been glorified as the only kind of choice we have” (page 42).

Salecl argues that the story of the self-made man that has historically accompanied capitalism has been transformed from a straightforward tale of social mobility and individual competition into a more pervasive and fundamental notion of self-mastery via choice that has reshaped our ontology. “Everything in life has become a matter of decisions that need to be made in order to come close to the ideal of happiness and self-fulfillment that society promotes” (page 22). The classed dimensions of this ideology are obvious; not everyone has the same opportunities and available choices, thus, the game is rigged. But Salecl’s analytical frame here is not so much directed at unequal opportunity, but on the reproduction of market capitalism itself. With a belief in and adherence to rational choice comes an incitement to imagine every aspect of ourselves as areas of investment that can be individually and “rationally mastered”; if we just make the right choices, we can have happy social lives, material wealth, passionate romantic relationships, sexy bodies, and so on. However, the “freedom” to choose our way, the notion of choosing the things that will make us happy, and willing ourselves to happiness is accompanied by great anxiety since we don’t know the “right choices” that will help us reach our goals. To deal with this insecurity, we begin to impose our own limits and prohibitions on our choices. Salecl points to the success of the self-help industry, the emergence of life-coaches, and popularization of feng-shui as evidence of people seeking alleviation of anxiety from choice and direction towards personal success. Rather than ameliorating concerns or providing some satisfaction, these practices create *more* anxiety as they illuminate compounding aspects of the self where people need to invest their time.

Salecl delves into the psychic processes of how we actually make choices and how we choose the objects of our desire: how and why we decide what it is that will make us happy and satisfied. Here, Salecl grounds her work in Lacanian theory. She characterizes individuals as inherently lacking and desiring subjects who make sense of their incompleteness and desires in relation to the desires of others, and most especially the symbolic order, or “Big Other”, that is, the “language, institutions, culture- everything that collectively makes up the social space in which we live” (page 59). To put another way, people forge identities and make decisions about what will make them feel happy and whole in relation to their perception of how individuals and culture writ-large “see” them. Salecl suggests that, with the splintering and decline of metanarratives that provide some amount of agreed-upon order and explanation to the world, it is the capitalist-market and its concomitant ideology of rational choice, which has become the Big Other. As a result, “we think we can choose not only the objects that will bring us satisfaction, but also the entire direction of our lives” (pages 64-65). With no coherent cultural map helping us to determine who we are and what we should do, it is all up to us. The creation of our ideal selves, then, becomes something to obsess over. On the one hand, we are constantly struggling to decide what that ideal self is—who we are and who we should be. On the other hand, we are always unable to achieve the ideal self—body, career, life, and so on—that we have been given responsibility over.

Adding another layer of complication, Salecl argues that people don't make decisions about how to achieve their desires in accordance with rational thought alone—even when they aim to—but are instead motivated and compelled by the unconscious and irrational. This dynamic is taken up in extended fashion in the middle chapters that focus on rational choice in relation to sexual partners (Chapter 3) and reproduction (Chapter 4). Salecl suggests that, though freedom of choice in these matters might appear empowering—providing people with ostensibly more control over their bodies and sexual lives for example—they actually create more anxiety as people attempt to assert more conscious control over matters and desires that are always uncertain and are often made and responded to unconsciously. Even more, and it is here that the text begins to drift and muddy the waters a bit, Salecl suggests that a practice of freedom of choice in sexual-romantic relationships leads to problematic social arrangements and outcomes. For example, she appears to lament the disintegration of a reified romantic love, and almost frowns upon the practice of less committed, more transient relationships and identities. The reader gets the impression that, for Salecl, today's "hook-up" dating scene is not simply a problem because of how it is grounded in rational choice ideology, but because of its loosening of morals. She asks, "Do we still have place for sublime, romantic love, or have we turned into a narcissistic culture less concerned with love and desire and more concerned with finding, quick, temporary satisfaction?" (page 86). It's not that there isn't, perhaps, something worth thinking about in her assertions, but these forays seem far afield and distract from her more integral argument. Are they intended as drawn out vignettes of how unconscious desires influence decision-making? Are they critical reflections on sexual mores and contemporary feminism? Whatever the case may be, in her eagerness to connect her thesis to contemporary sexual politics, she too narrowly treats changing sexual and gender dynamics as mere effects of rational choice ideology. In the process she ends up almost fetishizing a type of romantic (monogamous?) love that feminist and Marxist scholars (among others) have argued to have structural and ideological ties to patriarchy and the reproduction of capitalism.

The ideology of rational choice tells us that we are individually responsible for our lot. This naturalizes inequalities. And it creates great anxiety about the need to rationally master a multiplicity of areas of our life, anxiety over our ability to make the right choices to accomplish mastery, and anxiety over the loss of choices not made. These feelings bind us and direct our desires to improving and investing in our individual selves; we want to resolve the anxiety through efforts of individualized transformation and reform. Moreover, Salecl argues in the conclusion that the feelings of inadequacy and shame that accompany our inability to have any real control over our choices or meet the expectations that we have placed on ourselves causes us to "avert our gaze from society at large and focus on ourselves" (page 140) rather than turning our efforts outward and transforming society. Salecl does a great service by showing us how capitalism is reproduced through our unconscious desires that are mediated through the symbolic order. But what is to be done? Salecl is interested in social reproduction, not social change, and offers little direct guidance on this point, but she attests that change is possible at the level of

the individual and “at the level of society, but only when it is no longer perceived as an individual prerogative” (page 148). The book was published just prior to the recent explosion of the local and global protests that developed as a response to growing inequalities. These movements have opened the field of possibility; more and more people are realizing that they are as individuals intimately connected to the social, to power, to culture, that their lives are not totally their own. Even as austerity tightens, there is increasing resistance and growing desires for “something else”.

As we have seen historically, however, there is danger that the anxiety and insecurity produced by this potential revolutionary moment might be addressed by desires tied to simple redistribution and reform. In other words, the idea is to make the economy and society fairer so people can have better opportunities to individually compete against each other for jobs and resources. Yet, these desires merely reaffirm the “Big Other” of capitalism. It is here, in this place of opportunity and uncertainty, that the Lacanian insights around ideology and the subject that Salecl so nicely illustrates becomes particularly salient: our ideas and actions are not driven entirely by the rational mind but are influenced by unconscious desires that are themselves produced by a relationship to the symbolic order. Thus, we can't simply will ourselves a new world. Stepping out of the political and ethical morass of fighting over which form of capitalism is better or more humane might require more than rational discussions about the vagaries of capitalism, speaking truth to power, or making rational demands on the state. We would do well instead to locate the spaces where desires for non-capitalism are already flourishing and invest ourselves in practicing new forms of sociality, creating and amplifying new representations of the economy, and developing new modes of collective action.